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**Skipping the Interagency Process Can Mean Courting Disaster:
The Case of Desert One**

Core Course 5603 Paper

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The April 1980 attempted rescue of Americans held hostage in Iran suffered from many shortcomings. The focus of this paper will be not the actual April 11 decision to go ahead with the mission, but rather the earlier decision to maximize security by “keeping to an absolute minimum the number of people who knew about the mission.”¹ thus fatefully minimizing interagency and intra-agency coordination. While impossible to say that better coordination and consultation would have overcome all the shortcomings and problems the mission encountered, it is possible to posit that such coordination could have helped – and with only minimal added risk to the much-sought secrecy. This case demonstrates that however contentious, clumsy and sometimes time-consuming, the interagency process (one more example of America’s affinity for checks and balances) produces more well-rounded decisions than do maverick, off-the-cuff, ad hoc arrangements.

A Disaster with Many Causes

Almost as soon as alleged “student” radicals seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, consideration of an armed rescue mission began. In his memoirs, President Jimmy Carter recalled that “on November 6, two days after the American Embassy was taken, we commenced plans for a possible rescue operation.”² National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski led the push for action and chaired a special small commission to supervise the planning. As would characterize every aspect of the

¹ Jimmy Carter, Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President, Bantam Books, New York, 1982, pg. 511

² Op. Cit., pg. 459

mission, this commission and subsequent NSC meetings, were kept to absolute minimal participation – usually only Brzezinski, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, Director of Central Intelligence Stansfield Turner, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Jones³

Once initial authorization was given to begin consideration of a rescue attempt. Major General James Vaught was named to lead the effort. The planning phase (code-named Rice Bowl) was taken up by a small, ad hoc group set up by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Their task would not be easy, for

Jimmy Carter authorized a high-risk, covert operation and then imposed excessive restrictions. First, the White House instructed that an assault force be set to go immediately and that it be kept lean and small. Next, it decreed that maximum operational security (OPSEC) be enforced to ensure total surprise⁴

Throughout the fall of 1979, all options were discarded as too risky given the absence of any reported mistreatment of or direct threat to the health or safety of the hostages. When the Soviet Union invaded neighboring Afghanistan in December 1979, concerns about a possible Soviet reaction and perhaps assistance to Iran added to the reasons to delay any implementation.

Planning and training nonetheless continued despite the hesitancy to order a rescue mission at the time. As National Security Council staffer for Iran Gary Sick

³ Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977-1981, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1983, pg. 483

⁴ Paul B. Ryan, The Iranian Rescue Mission: Why It Failed, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 1985, pg. 15

noted, “the possibility of military action always lay just beneath the surface of events”⁵ As with the very small, very senior group which made decisions on overall questions, JCS planning was ordered to take place within the smallest possible group As Paul Ryan reported in one of the best evaluations of the mission,

for reasons of security the JCS consciously chose not to implement their Contingency Plan (CONPLAN) on the grounds that too many people might be involved and secrecy jeopardized For the same reason they decided not to use a current JCS-developed framework for a Joint Task Force (JTF)⁶

Thus, General Vaught

was not authorized to use the existing JTF structure,. but instead was forced to resort to ad hoc methods (He) held in abeyance their organized and well-oiled CONPLAN and JTF organization plan, relying more on improvised arrangements for the rescue plan⁷

It is my contention that it was the extraordinary emphasis on secrecy at this level of the planning process – not the small size of the more senior Brzezinski group – which undermined the mission’s chance for success Admittedly, pressure for this degree of security emanated from the White House It led planners to depend on impromptu, ad hoc and untested or trained contingencies, which, egged on by the sense of urgency generated by the White House, crippled any hope for successful implementation As the military’s own unclassified after-action report concludes, “the great emphasis on OPSEC, although vital to mission success, severely limited the communication necessary to

⁵ Cited in John E. Valliere “Disaster at Desert One Catalyst for Change,” Parameters Autumn 1992, pg 71

⁶ Ryan Ibid , pg 20

⁷ Op Cit , pg 20-21

coordinate the operation, particularly in handling unforeseen contingencies”⁸ And it was precisely “unforeseen contingencies,” such as sandstorms and mechanical failures, which were to spell the proximate doom of the mission As Clausewitz recognized, things all too often go wrong in military operations and this “friction” can sidetrack the best laid plans of political and military strategists He reminds us not only that “everything in war is very simply, but the simplest thing is difficult,” but also that “in war more than anywhere else things do not turn out as we expect”⁹

In the case of the rescue mission, complex values – notably the competing priorities of tight security versus a full vetting of options and assumptions – undermined the possibility of success Specifically, the enforced obsession with security overrode standard operational procedures leading to an ad hoc JCS task force, ad hoc training, ad hoc reviews, ad hoc intelligence arrangements, and an ad hoc chain of command Each of these issues is cited in the Holloway Report as having “had an identifiable influence on the outcome of the hostage rescue effort”¹⁰

Bureaucratic Decision-making Has its Advantages

I know of few participants who will say they actually enjoy the pulling and hauling of the interagency and intra-agency process, but as the faulty ad hoc

⁸ Admiral J L Holloway, III, Statement of Admiral J L Holloway, III, USN (Ret), Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, DC August 1980, pg 12 Cited hereafter as the Holloway Report

⁹ Carl von Clausewitz On War Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1976, pages 119 and 193

¹⁰ Holloway Report, Ibid , pg 56

arrangements of the Iranian hostage rescue mission show, the process itself does make a positive contribution to decision-making. The American polity and public have long favored checks and balances, fearing too much power in any one person's or institution's hands. The American Constitution has often been called an "invitation to struggle," pitting the three branches of government against each other. Within those branches, the House struggles with the Senate, legislative committees struggle amongst themselves, executive departments use the interagency process to struggle over competing interests, and within departments and agencies separate struggles iron out even more parochial views.

Americans have often been willing to forego obsessive secrecy, speed and decisiveness in favor of compromise and thoroughly vetted ideas and options. We have also developed ways and means to expedite and protect the process when necessary. From the Panama incursion to the Mayaguez rescue, from sensitive arms control treaties to trade negotiations, we have been able to plan and execute closely-held operations while also making full use of our carefully-crafted interagency process. Appropriate compartmentalization and the personal integrity of the vast majority of interagency participants work to maintain security, while also providing for a full vetting of ideas, assumptions, and options.

As complex as it appears on paper, we have preferred coping with a bureaucratic decision-making process, in which all organizational equities and information can be brought to bear. We like multiple advocacy, we like strategic pluralism. Even when our

parochial views lose, at least we know why we were not successful and that our position got a fair hearing

Lowest Levels Can be the Most Contentious

As seen in the Desert One case, coordination worked best at the very highest levels. The small core group led by Brzezinski met regularly and kept the most key players (State, Defense, JCS, NSC) advised. (The most notable exception was the failure to include Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher in the loop, which led to his acquiescence in the April 11, 1980 decision – for he understated and failed to argue forcibly his boss' objections ¹¹)

We often hear of the excellent personal and professional relations today among the current incumbents of these same positions. Secretaries Cohen and Albright and National Security Advisor Berger genuinely respect and like each other and thus freely and easily coordinate with each other. Even when they disagree, as over the recent cancellation of attacks on Iraq, they do so professionally and within the confines of the interagency process.

The more contentious level, perhaps because it is the more parochial level, is lower down, closer to where competing priorities and “rice bowls” exist. In the planning for Desert One, it was also at this level, beneath the JCS/OSD/State level, that the

¹¹ Cyrus Vance, Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1983, pg. 409

instructions for ultimate security undercut the strength of intra-agency coordination. Secrecy cut out the inter- and intra-agency process and resulted in ad hoc arrangements, about which the Holloway Report found that “prolonged ad hoc arrangements often result in taskings from different sources and can cause confusion at the operating level”¹²

Not Easy, Not Quick – Not Bad

There are few who love the pulling, hauling, pushing and logrolling of the inter- or intra-agency process. But it does tend to produce decisions which have the greatest chance of success and support. By keeping each other on our toes and making us justify and defend our positions, decisionmakers act with the benefit of the greatest possible range of information. The Holloway Report reached the same conclusion regarding the absence of a qualified “murder board” for the rescue planning. The report posited that “such a plan review element could have played an important balancing role in the dynamic planning process that evolved, conceivably making a critical contribution to ultimate mission accomplishment.”¹³

An easing of security to include a more typical interagency coordination would not have stopped the sandstorms, but it might have briefed the pilots on what to expect and how to survive them. The interagency process would not have prevented mechanical failures, but it might have briefed pilots on past experience, what to expect, and how to react. The interagency process would not have eliminated the need for critical, time-

¹² Op Cit, pg 18

¹³ Op Cit pg 22

sensitive decisions such as to abort or not, but it would have worked out specific, agreed rules of engagement and a clear chain of command and responsibility

The disaster of Desert One engendered major examinations not only of the specific of this case, but also of joint operations and covert planning in general. Some argue the rescue failure was one of the impetuses behind the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986¹⁴, which places such emphasis on “jointness” -- which is another way of saying coordination and cooperation. Beyond the question of the selection of units to participate (for example, by what rationale did all the services have to be represented), the failure of this “joint” operation can in part be explained simply because “operational security (was) so tight that most of the men on the mission did not know what the overall plan was until shortly before they took off for Desert One.”¹⁵

By circumventing the interagency process in the name of secrecy, the planners of Desert One deprived themselves of important sources of information and experience which could well have advanced the planning, preparation and execution of the operation. So too, strategic thinkers, planners and implementers today must learn to live with -- and use -- that same process, that same “invitation to struggle,” in order to craft the best possible strategies and policies for advancing American national interests into the next millennium.

¹⁴ Valliere, *Ibid*, pg 69

¹⁵ Drew Middleton, “Going the Military Route,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 17, 1981, pg 107

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